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OES FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY MCMURRAY
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TAGS: SENV TBIO MY BX ID
SUBJECT: HEART OF BORNEO: PROTECTING THE WORLD'S OLDEST FOREST

REF: BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 0497

¶1. (U) Portions of this message are sensitive but unclassified.

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¶2. (U) Summary: Malaysian support for the Heart of Borneo (HOB) conservation initiative is solidifying at all levels. WWF, which is actively promoting the initiative, expects the leaders of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei to sign a declaration formally launching the HOB program at the December ASEAN Summit. During a visit to Sabah State, in northern Borneo, the Ambassador found broad support for HOB among public and private sector stakeholders, as well as appreciation for the Secretary's July announcement that the U.S. would be contributing \$100,000 to the initiative. Sabahan supporters viewed the USG pledge as a significant expression of global interest in HOB that would raise the profile of the project within the three governments and encourage their efforts to launch it. Environmental activists working to protect orangutans and other endangered species are pleased that HOB would facilitate the creation of critical migratory corridors between the fragmented parks of the island, as well as increase the area of tropical forest land preserved from development. Delivering quickly on our funding pledge will help sustain momentum toward the formal launch of this multinational effort to protect and preserve the world's oldest rainforest. We also should be working now to line up more substantial and sustained funding, which could be announced immediately following the release of the HOB declaration in December. End summary.

Protecting the World's Oldest and Most Biodiverse Forest

¶3. (U) The undisturbed primary forest of Borneo is 130 million years old, far older than the forests of Brazil and Africa and rivaled in age only by the Daintree Forest of northern Australia. The longer time span has allowed for the evolution of greater biodiversity, the range and depth of which is still unplumbed. Over the past decade in Borneo, previously unknown species of plants and animals have been discovered at an average rate of 3 per month. The area provides habitat for 54 species listed as endangered or critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), including the orangutan and the Sumatran rhino; as well as species such as the Malayan sun bear that IUCN suspects may be endangered, but that have been so poorly studied that there is insufficient data to confirm their status.

¶4. (U) Borneo's forests extend across three national

borders) Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei) and the border between two Malaysian states) Sabah and Sarawak. Much of the natural environment has been severely degraded by logging, the establishment of plantations (particularly palm oil), and mining and other extractive activities. Significant swaths of primary and secondary forest remain, however, in 23 different parks and conservation areas maintained by the nine different government entities on the island (the three national and two Malaysian state governments mentioned above, and the four Indonesian provinces of Kalimantan). As conceived and promoted by the conservation organization WWF, the Heart of Borneo (HOB) program would coordinate and expand the conservation efforts of these governments in an integrated program covering as much as 220,000 square kilometers) an area roughly the size of the state of Minnesota.

¶15. (SBU) WWF has been careful to respect the sensibilities of the governments concerned and insists that it is acting only as a catalyst. Nevertheless, WWF-Malaysia expects that WWF headquarters soon will designate HOB as one of only five &Class A8 projects that the organization deems to be the world,s top conservation priorities. Policymakers from Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei discussed HOB and approved the concept in principle at the July 2006 ASEAN ministerial meeting in Kuala Lumpur. The Secretary pledged \$100,000 to support HOB during her visit to KL for the ministerial. Since July, officials of the three countries, with support and encouragement from WWF, have been working through the steps necessary to formally launch the initiative. In Malaysia, these efforts have focused on bringing the two state governments of Sabah and Sarawak on board. (Comment: Malaysian state governments have a measure of independence from the Federal government, in particular in matters of land and forest usage. Buy in from Sabah and Sarawak will be critical to the success of HOB.) The Malaysian internal

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process culminated in a meeting on the island of Labuan (off Western Sabah) September 21-22, at which all parties agreed in principle to support HOB. While work continues within and between the three national governments to finalize arrangements, WWF officials are optimistic that the leaders of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei will sign a declaration formally launching the Heart of Borneo initiative at the ASEAN Summit in Cebu, Philippines December 10-13, 2006.

Critical Role of Wildlife Corridors

¶16. (U) Ambassador and Economic Counselor visited the Danum Valley conservation area in Eastern Sabah) one of the proposed keystone parks for the Heart of Borneo program) and Kota Kinabalu, the state capital, to discuss HOB with government officials, researchers, environmentalists and other stakeholders. The trip also provided opportunities for public outreach to highlight U.S. support for nature conservation worldwide and the Secretary,s funding pledge for HOB in particular. The primary forest of the Danum Valley contrasts starkly with the logged-over secondary forest on its borders, yet 10 years of research by the husband-and-wife team of Dr. Isabelle Lackman and Marc Acrenaz, directors of the local NGO Hutan, has convinced them that orangutans, pygmy elephants and other species indigenous to Borneo can survive even in secondary forest zones under the right conditions. One key measure is to ensure that natural corridors are preserved to allow animals to migrate freely between conserved areas. Lackman and Acrenaz cited genetic research showing that the estimated 1100 orangutans living in the Kinabatangan River Valley of Eastern Sabah, an area where palm oil cultivation is widespread, live in 10 different family groupings that rarely intermingle. Unless this situation changes, inbreeding could lead to the extinction of these isolated groups within two to three decades. They expressed strong support for the potential of

the Heart of Borneo to address this type of challenge by linking up protected habitat areas with established migratory corridors.

¶17. (U) Another local researcher, Wong Siew Te of the Danum Valley Research Center (and a Phd. candidate of the University of Montana) highlighted the important role wild pigs play in sustaining Borneo's forests. Seeds from the dipterocarp trees that make up 90 percent of the native primary forest are a significant food source for Borneo's &bearded pig.⁸ Historically, herds of pigs propagated the tree seeds in wide ranging migrations. Wong cited accounts of migrations of thousands of pigs, which sometimes took half a day to pass a given point. Such mass migrations no longer occur in Eastern Sabah. Wong acknowledged that he has no research to support his supposition, but he believes the absence of mass migrations is due to the break up of large forested areas by logging, plantations and other human activities. He speculates that this will lead to a decline in new tree recruitment that will become noticeable in the next 10-20 years. Like Lackman and Acrenaz, he supports the creation of wildlife corridors that would be facilitated by Heart of Borneo.

Appreciation for USG Support

¶18. (SBU) Public and private sector stakeholders in Sabah expressed appreciation for the Secretary's funding pledge. In a joint press conference with the Ambassador at the Kota Kinabalu Wetlands Center, WWF-Malaysia Chairman Tengku Zainal Adlin called the U.S. contribution a &significant expression of global interest⁸ in Heart of Borneo. Speaking to the media, he stressed that WWF was only a catalyst and emphasized that the individual governments would decide the best approach to managing their resources. In private conversation, he said he thought the U.S. contribution would raise the profile of the project within the three governments and encourage their efforts to launch it.

¶19. (SBU) Deputy Chief Minister for Tourism and the Environment Chong Kah Kiat told the Ambassador the Sabah State government &is all for a WWF-led Heart of Borneo.⁸ When Tengku Adlin demurred and said that governments needed to be in the lead, Deputy CM Chong countered &do not expect the governments to take the initiative.⁸ &You must push,⁸ he told the WWF-Malaysia Chairman, &otherwise no one will push.⁸ Chong also lauded the Secretary's pledge as a means to raise the profile of HOB and encourage the support of

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senior leaders in the three national governments. He stressed the need for &strong support at the political level⁸ to overcome vested interests.

Maintaining Momentum

¶110. (SBU) Comment: We did not encounter any of the concerns reftel reports with the size of the U.S. pledge. However, two months have passed and at some point questions will start to be asked about how and when the pledge will be implemented. Delivering quickly on the Secretary's promise will help sustain momentum toward the formal launch of this multinational effort to protect and preserve the world's oldest rainforest. We also should be working now to line up more substantial and sustained funding, which ideally would be announced immediately following the release of the HOB declaration in December. The Heart of Borneo project will take years to plan and implement, and will require a large measure of deferred gratification from the people of Borneo. A clear global commitment to provide significant long-term funding for this effort will give the governments involved the confidence they need to undertake it.

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